IN PRAISE OF CATS

By AGNES REPPLIER

Drawings by Elizabeth F. Bonsall

THERE are still people in this world—men and women belonging to an advanced civilization—who do not like cats. They say that these charming creatures are treacherous and ungrateful, by which they mean that a cat resents liberties, and cherishes her native independence. She will not endure a too intrusive patronage, and, like Mr. Chesterton, will not recognize imaginary obligations. If we keep a cat because there are mice in our cellar, or rats in a neighboring stable, what claim have we upon her gratitude? She hunts for the pleasure of the chase, not for the convenience of the cook or butler, and accepts the shelter we offer on her own terms. There may be a reasonable selfishness in her point of view (the cat is no altruist); but it is absurd to talk about ingratitude. It is not from motives of benevolence that we desire to be rid of vermin.

Even if we cherish a cat for her beauty, for her fireside qualities, for the subtle alchemy which transforms a house into a home; even if we lavish our affection upon her, if we feel a thrill of pleasure every time we touch her fur or look into her somber eyes,—what claim have we in all of this to gratitude? The cat does not invite our love, and does not enjoy our demonstrations. She is the most decorative creature the world has to show. She harmonizes with the kitchen hearth and with the library fire. She gratifies our sense of beauty and our sense of distinction, should we chance to possess these qualities. She submits to our endearments, sometimes with superb indifference, sometimes with patient courtesy. I have roused my cat with kisses and caresses a dozen times in one evening from her sweet slumbers, and every time she has responded with a drowsy purr. She did not like to be disturbed; but she knew that my blundering attentions were well meant, and she murmured her polite acknowledgments to the familiar touch. I should not like to risk awakening my best human friend a dozen times from sleep, and have to trust too far to his or her urbanity.

The truth is that nothing can rid us of the impression that all animals are, or should be, flattered by our notice. The dog has so long ministered to our vanity by its exuberant and unqualified devotion, that we resent the colder temperament, the self sufficing serenity, of the cat. Look, for example, at Pussy in one of her favorite haunts,—a shop window. She sits curled up on a box of soap or candles, secure from approach, and watching the street with languid interest. Every now and then some affable pedestrian stops to give her greeting. He says "Hello, Pussy!" and taps the glass to attract her attention. She does not turn her head nor raise her lustrous eyes to look at him. He taps louder, and with more offensive familiarity. She remains motionless, absorbed in reverie, unconscious apparently of his intrusive presence. He cannot startle or cajole her into recognizing his advances, or even his existence. As well try to patronize the Sphinx as to patronize a grocer's cat. She is as remote, as inscrutable, and as untouched by our friendly condescension.

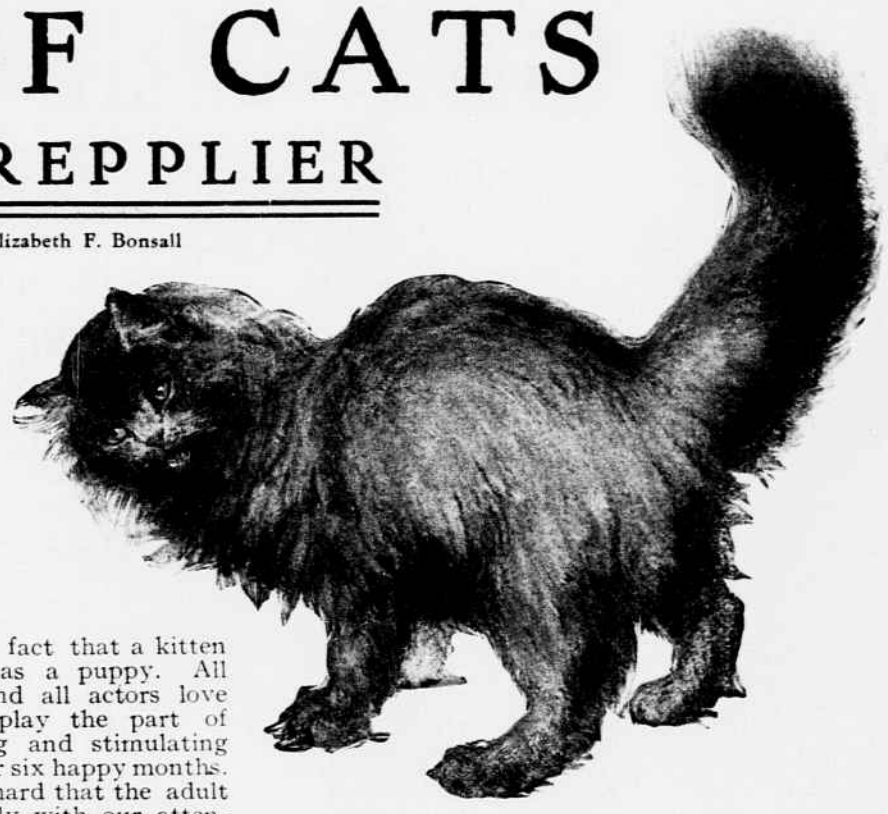
What makes this contemptuousness so humiliating is the fact that a kitten is almost as social as a puppy. All kittens are actors, and all actors love an audience. We play the part of audience, encouraging and stimulating the kitten's antics—for six happy months. Naturally we find it hard that the adult cat dispenses so coldly with our attentions. A kitten is the most riotous playfellow in the world. To watch one prancing and paddling about the room is to be beguiled from every serious care and occupation. Cowper, whose cares were serious enough, Heaven knows! embracing as they did the fear of madness and damnation, escaped from melancholy when his kitten practised her comedy parts; and he wrote to Lady Hesketh a minute account of this thrilling and marvelous performance:

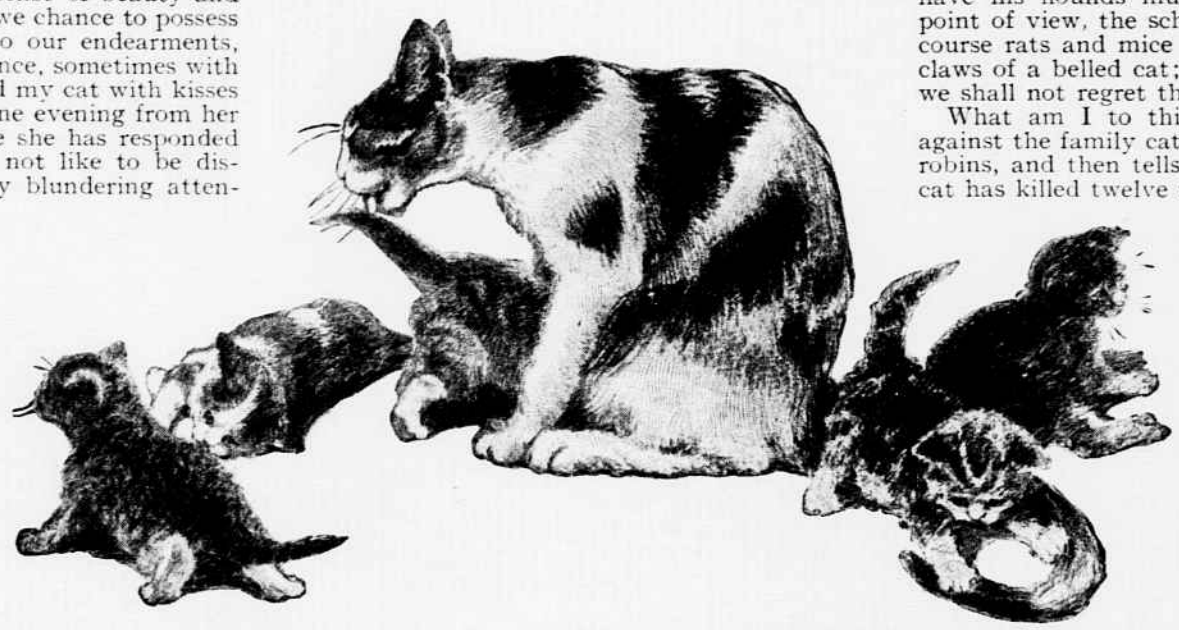
Cowper's Droll Kitten

I HAVE a kitten, my dear, the drollest of all creatures that ever wore a cat's skin. Her gambols are incredible, and not to be described. She tumbles head over heels several times together. She lays her cheek to the ground, and humps her back at you with an air of most supreme disdain. From this posture she rises to dance on her hind feet, an exercise which she performs with all the grace imaginable; and she closes these various exhibitions with a loud smack of her lips, which, for want of greater propriety of expression, we call spitting. But, though all cats spit, no cat ever produced such a sound as she does. In point of size, she is likely to be a kitten always, being extremely small for her age; but time, that spoils all things, will, I suppose, make her also a cat. You will see her, I hope, before that melancholy period shall arrive; for no wisdom that she may gain by experience and reflection hereafter will compensate for the loss of her present hilarity. She is dressed in a tortoise shell suit, and I know that you will delight in her."

If Cowper could have lived more with kittens and less with evangelical clergymen, his hours of gaiety might have outnumbered his hours of gloom.

Cats have been known to retain all their lives the vivacity of early youth. Frederick Locker tells of a light hearted old Tom which pursued in extreme age the thoughtless amusements of his kittenhood, and actually chased his own tail ten minutes before he died. But such a cat belonged (as Lowell said of himself) in a home for incurable children. Nor should we care to see the monumental calm of the fireside Sphinx degenerate into senile playfulness. Her immobility befits her type, and is worthy of her great ancestors who dwelt superbly in the temples of Pasht. When we remember a cat's wonderful flexibility, when we have seen her speed like a greyhound and spring like a panther, when we know that every muscle is strong, elastic and well trained,—we admire all the more humbly the measured slowness of her ordinary gait. To watch her moving imperceptibly through a doorway,—while we are holding open the door,—to see the rhythmic waving of her tail, is like looking at a procession. With just such deliberate dignity, with just such solemn state, the priests of Ra filed between the endless rows of pillars into the sunlit temple court.





A cat is a freebooter. She draws no nice distinction between a mouse in a wainscot and a canary swinging in its gilded cage. Her traducers indeed have been wont to intimate that her preference is for the forbidden spoils. "An ordinary cat," says the libelous author of "My Indian Garden," "will devote a whole day to the circumvention of the lodger's canary, rather than spend an hour upon the landlady's rats. A single bullfinch in the drawing room is worth a wilderness of mice in the pantry."

This is a prejudiced point of view. The cat can be taught that a canary is a privileged nuisance, immune from molestation; but she has little patience with such mistaken sentiment. The bird's shrill, persistent note jars her sensitive nerves. She abhors noise, and a canary's song is the most piercing and least musical of noises. Moreover, the cage presents just difficulties enough to serve as an incentive. That Puss habitually refrains from ridding the household of canaries is a proof of her innate reasonableness, of her willingness to submit her own better judgment to the fads and follies of humanity.

Only One Hope for Birds

AS for the wild birds,—the robins and wrens and thrushes,—which are predestined prey, there is only one way to save them,—the way which Archibald Douglas took to save the honor of Scotland,—"bell the cat." A good sized sleigh bell, if she is strong enough to bear it; a bunch of little bells, if she is small and slight,—and the pleasures of the chase are over. One little bell is of no avail; for she will learn to move so smoothly that it will not ring until she springs, and then it rings too late. There is an element of cruelty in depriving the cat of sport (ask a fox hunter how he would like to have his hounds muzzled); but, from the bird's point of view, the scheme works to perfection. Of course rats and mice are as safe as birds from the claws of a belled cat; but if we are really humane we shall not regret their immunity.

What am I to think of a friend who inveighs against the family cat for eating up a nest of young robins, and then tells me exultingly that the same cat has killed twelve moles in a week. To a pitiful heart the life of a little mole is as sacred as the life of a little robin. To an artistic eye the mole in its velvet coat is handsomer than the robin, which is at best a bouncing, bourgeois sort of bird,—a true suburbanite, with all the defects of its class. But my friend has no mercy for the mole, because it undermines her garden,—her garden which bears twice as many flowers as she can pick. And what are flowers, after all, compared to a living creature? To wax compassionate over a bird, and grow hard as flint to a beast, is possible only to humanity. The cat, following its predatory instincts, is at once more logical and less ruthless, because the question of property does not distort its vision. It has none of the vices of civilization.

They call me cruel. Do I know if mouse or songbird feels?
I only know they make me light and salutary meals.

The cat's nocturnal habits, its stealthy prowl, and the wide range of its vocalism have in some measure obscured its charming fireside qualities. It

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